

Challenges facing school disciplinary committees in addressing student's sexual harassment in Tanzania

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Abstract. The study explored the challenges that School Discipline Committees (SDCs) encounter in addressing student sexual harassment in Tanzania. The goal of this study is to identify and analyse the obstacles faced by SDCs in effectively addressing incidents of student sexual harassment. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design was adopted, involving a sample size of 36 participants, including teachers and parents, selected purposefully from three public secondary schools. Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) before being thematically analysed. The findings revealed that the challenges facing SDCs in addressing student sexual harassment include a shortage of teachers, poor understanding of the sexual harassment phenomenon, reporting barriers, lack of awareness, and insufficient training. These challenges often hinder effective policy practices and school responses to student sexual harassment, ultimately compromising student safety and support. In response, the study proposes comprehensive strategies for improvement, including enhanced training programmes for SDC members, clearer reporting protocols, and increased community awareness initiatives. The study recommends that the government, through its responsible ministries, should strengthen the composition of SDCs by stipulating their structure and roles in effectively addressing student sexual harassment in public secondary schools in Tanzania.

Keywords: school discipline committee, addressing, sexual harassment

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) in educational institutions is a critical global issue that demands urgent attention [7, 13, 35] due to its pervasive nature in public secondary schools, where both teachers and students have become desensitised to the issue [4, 16]. It encompasses various forms of unwanted sexual behaviour, including forced sexual intercourse, unwanted touching, sexual comments, rape, and other inappropriate sexual conduct by both students and teachers [11, 19, 33, 40, 44]. Both girls and boys are vulnerable to such harassment, though studies indicate higher risks for females, rural residents, and those over 15 years of age [32]. Sexual harassment has several negative impacts on students, including poor performance in academics [15, 17, 30]. Teachers face significant challenges in enhancing discipline, particularly regarding sexual harassment among secondary school students. Therefore, it is essential that discipline committees have regular meetings to discuss and implement effective strategies for curbing sexual harassment.

Recent global statistics highlight the persistent nature of sexual harassment in educational institutions. Research conducted across 192 countries revealed that 22%

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*Educational
Dimension*



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of high-income, 26% of middle-income, and 34% of low-income countries experience sexual harassment [21]. In Tanzania specifically, the number of reported sexual harassment cases has increased significantly, affecting students in various ways. The reported cases rose from 1,635 to 7,900 between 2016 and 2019 [20]. Moreover, a study conducted by Japhet [24] found that 50.2% of secondary school students in Dar es Salaam experience at least one form of sexual harassment, which may be physical, verbal, or non-verbal.

To address this issue, various countries have implemented preventive measures. In Kenya, public secondary schools utilise discipline committees to manage students' behaviour, including addressing sexual harassment cases [41]. Additionally, the Tanzanian government has introduced laws criminalising sexual relationships with students and enacted the Anti-Sexual Harassment and Anti-Gender Discrimination Regulation Act of 2013, mandating protective policies in schools [43, p. 104-109]. The government of Tanzania, through Article No. 6 of 2022, further requires heads of schools to establish discipline committees aimed at addressing and mitigating sexual harassment in schools [42]. Despite these measures, sexual harassment often remains a hidden problem for students, hindering the effectiveness of school discipline committees [29, 36].

Exploring the challenges faced by school discipline committees in addressing sexual harassment in schools is crucial not only for the well-being of individual students but also for fostering an educational environment that challenges harmful social norms, including those that normalise and excuse sexual violence and harassment [27]. This study examines the challenges faced by the School Disciplinary Committees in tackling sexual harassment among students in public secondary schools in Tanzania. By focusing on this critical issue, the research aims to contribute actionable strategies and solutions that foster safer and more equitable learning environments for all students in Tanzania and other countries experiencing similar issues.

2. Theoretical framework

This study adopted the Team Roles Theory developed by Raymond Meredith Belbin [6]. The theory helped in understanding the individual's behavioural tendencies and how they contribute to effective teamwork. This theory emphasises the importance of diverse roles within a team to enhance performance and problem-solving capabilities. In the context of the school discipline committees, understanding and leveraging the different roles, such as coordinators, shapers, and teamwork, can help create a more effective approach to tackling sexual harassment. Each member's unique strengths can contribute to developing comprehensive strategies that address the complexities of sexual harassment, fostering collaboration among educators, administrators and students to create a safer school environment. Teamwork has often been highlighted as an important factor for the success of projects and organisational performance [38]. Various scholars have used the Belbin Team Role Theory in education. For instance, Prichard and Stanton [39] assessed the effectiveness of Belbin's Team Role Theory in educational settings, focusing on group dynamics and performance. The findings suggested that diverse roles within teams contribute significantly to overall effectiveness, supporting the application of this theory in educational group work. Belbin's framework encourages recognising individual contributions while promoting collective responsibility. This alignment is crucial in addressing sexual harassment effectively, as it requires preventive strategies that involve educating the school community about how to overcome sexual harassment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach and design

This qualitative investigation took place in 2024 within Kasulu District Council (DC), Kigoma Region in Tanzania. The selection of Kasulu DC was strategic in the view that it was chosen for its unique characteristics, notably its geographical remoteness from the Kigoma town council, which has led to limited research attention. Besides, the district has documented challenges regarding life skills education, particularly in raising awareness about sexual harassment, with a reported prevalence of 25.5% according to Basic Educational Statistics [23]. A hermeneutic phenomenological design was employed to capture the varied ways through which participants understand and experience the challenges faced by School Discipline Committees (SDCs) in addressing student sexual harassment.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select 12 members from SDCs, 12 class teachers and 12 parents from three public secondary schools. Several measures were implemented to minimise potential sampling bias, including the selection of key informants such as Head of Schools and SDC members alongside class teachers to ensure diverse perspectives. Parents were chosen from various socioeconomic backgrounds with different levels of involvement within the school board. The selection criteria were clearly documented and justified to promote transparency. In addition, maximum variation sampling within the purposive framework was employed to capture a wide range of experiences and viewpoints. Finally, the sample size was determined through data saturation, as outlined by Charmaz [12], ensuring comprehensive coverage of emerging themes.

3.2. Data collection, analysis, and ethical aspects

Regarding data collection, the duration of interviews was between 40-60 minutes, and the focus group discussions took at least 60-80 minutes, of which it was carefully planned to balance the depth of discussion with participant engagement. Several strategies were employed to ensure a thorough exploration of sensitive topics. Pre-interview rapport-building sessions were conducted to establish trust, and flexible timing was allowed when participants needed more time to share sensitive information. Besides, multiple follow-up sessions were offered if participants wished to add up any information. Not only that but also breaks were incorporated during longer sessions to prevent participant fatigue. The interview and FGD guides were structured to progress from general to specific topics, allowing a natural flow of information into sensitive areas.

The combination of semi-structured interviews and FGDs provided methodological triangulation [5, 34], while also offering participants different contexts for sharing their experiences. Interviews provided privacy for discussing sensitive personal experiences, while FGDs facilitated broader discussions of systemic issues. This dual approach helped to ensure comprehensive data collection despite the time constraints with regard to the individual sessions.

Each data collection method was tailored to maximise its effectiveness within the given timeframe. Interviews focused on individual experiences and personal insights, whereas FGDs concentrated on collective challenges and potential solutions. Both formats included structured time for open-ended discussion, and session scheduling was flexible to accommodate participant needs and ensure a thorough exploration of topics.

The data collected for this study were analysed using inductive thematic analysis [9, 31]. The authors mentioned six criteria of thematic analysis, which include data familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing the research report. In this study, data

familiarisation involved repeated and intensive reading of different qualitative datasets generated through interviews and FGDs to get the general idea of the prepared dataset ready for generating initial codes. In this process, generating initial codes was essentially data-driven (inductive), and the research objective was revisited in response to how the collected dataset portrayed the message. Searching for themes involved sorting codes into themes whereby the coded and collated data extracts were scrutinised for potential themes of broader significance.

Reviewing themes entailed a review of all relevant codes and data extracts under each theme to ensure that each theme had adequate supporting data and that the data included were coherent in supporting that theme. As it was found, some of the themes were too enormous or diverse. In that regard, it should be noted that data within each theme had adequate commonality and coherence and data between themes had to be distinct enough to merit separation. This phase involved going back and forth between the dataset and the identified theme to organise the story into a coherent and internally consistent account. This enabled the creation of a definition and narrative description of each theme, including why it is important to the broader study question. In this study, writing the research report entailed creating a concise and relevant narrative from the data to comprehend the challenges faced by SDC in addressing student sexual harassment. Microsoft Excel programs supported data organisation, coding and theme identifications. Researchers ensured that all the data relating to the study were kept private, stored securely, and accessible to him or other close participants, and not otherwise. Anonymity was also considered as the researcher omitted all personal tenets from the data that could lead to the identification of study participants.

4. Results and discussion

Results are presented through four sub-themes: shortage of teachers, poor understanding of sexual harassment phenomena, reporting barriers, and insufficient training. The sub-themes are comprehensively discussed as follows:

4.1. Shortage of teachers

Participants noted that the shortage of teachers significantly hampers the SDC's ability to function properly, as many committee members are also burdened with other teaching responsibilities. As highlighted by the Head of School from School X, the few available committee members often prioritise their teaching duties over their roles in the SDC, treating it as a secondary responsibility:

The shortage of teachers makes them occupied all the time and spend most of their time fulfilling their primary role, which is teaching rather than dealing with discipline cases. For example, our school has 11 teachers who have to teach from form one to form four students. One teacher teaches more than 70 students in each class. This gives them difficulty in handling sexual harassment issues. (Interview with Head of School X in April 2024)

Concerning workload versus duties to address sexual harassment among students, a Discipline Teacher from School X shared his views:

You find that a teacher is supposed to be in the classroom teaching a particular subject at a time when the SDC has to convene for a meeting to discuss a sexual harassment incident; in fact, the teacher will likely prefer being in the classroom since that is his primary task. This is because when a teacher fails to cover all topics within the syllabus, claiming that he or she

was fulfilling the SDC's roles cannot be taken as an excuse. The fact is that when a teacher misses a class for any reason, they will have to compensate for it on their own time, such as on Saturday, without any extra payment. (Discipline Teacher at School X Interview in April 2024)

Moreover, during discussions with class teachers at School Y, one of the teachers stated:

Sometimes, we fail to make follow-ups regarding students' discipline incidents, including sexual harassment, because of the workload caused by a few teachers in the school. For example, one teacher may teach at least 60-70 students in one class. (FGD with class teachers at School Y in April 2024)

Similarly, one parent during FGD said:

Our school has a scarcity of teachers, which may be due to the remoteness of the schools. When teachers are employed, they often fight to be transferred to other regions or districts. Thus, the available teachers fail to implement other activities. (FGD with parents at School Z in April 2024)

With fewer teachers available, class sizes tend to increase as enrollment rises each year, leading to a higher student-to-teacher ratio. This results in less supervision and oversight of discipline incidents, including sexual harassment cases, making it easier for inappropriate behaviours to occur without detection. Teachers who constitute SDCs being overwhelmed by large classes may struggle to monitor interactions among students effectively, but the situation is not that easy, as teachers must also accomplish their teaching roles as required.

These findings align with the study conducted by Gituriandu, Mukolwe and Kimani [18], which found that heavy workloads from insufficient staffing lead to burnout, impairing teachers' ability to fulfil their duties. Teachers who manage their workloads effectively can better support students and enhance overall student achievement [26]. Celumusa and Mabuza [10] in Swaziland noted that the teacher-student ratio poses challenges for teachers in effectively addressing sexual harassment cases. High workloads can diminish morale and hinder performance, making it essential for the government and stakeholders to allocate adequate resources and staff, allowing teachers to focus on both educational responsibilities and the critical issue of student safety, including sexual harassment.

4.2. Limited understanding of sexual harassment phenomena

The study revealed that the lack of understanding of sexual harassment phenomena constrains the selection of appropriate strategies to eradicate sexual harassment in public secondary schools. It was found that schools and communities have poor knowledge of sexual harassment, leading to difficulties in addressing it.

A disciplinarian at School X said:

Some teachers, including members of the School Discipline Committee, do not fully understand the sexual harassment phenomenon. For example, when a teacher is asked about the meaning of sexual harassment, he or she may respond that it is when a student engages in sexual activities. In that regard, he works only when he gets information that a student has been sexually abused and not otherwise. (Interview with Discipline Teachers at School X in April 2024)

Meanwhile, when interviewing the Assistant Head of School X, he stated:

Sometimes, we consider sexual harassment as a disciplinary case in general. So, for me, I know sexual harassment is when students engage in behaviours such as sexual intercourse and not otherwise since I do not know other forms of sexual harassment. (Interview with Assistant Head of School X in April 2024)

This quotation was complemented by the views expressed by the Head of School Y, who informed:

Some teachers do not take the issue of sexual harassment seriously when it happens at school, as if it is a normal thing. Sometimes, they fail to resolve the challenges because of their limited understanding of sexual harassment among students. (Interview with Head of School Y in April 2024)

Furthermore, during an FGD with class teachers, one teacher said:

Sexual harassment includes all actions that can affect the performance of students in school. For example, sexual issues can affect students psychologically during their learning process; therefore, there is a need to take stern measures to deal with it when it happens and, if possible, to prevent it from happening. (FGD with class teachers at School X in April 2024)

The findings indicate that many teachers lack a comprehensive understanding of the behaviours and actions that constitute sexual harassment. These findings highlight the urgent need to educate all stakeholders to ensure they comprehend the true meaning of sexual harassment and the appropriate strategies for addressing it. The study's findings align with Johnson, Widnall and Benya [25], who discussed how many individuals, particularly women, do not label their experiences as sexual harassment, even when they experience it. This research highlights that misconceptions about what constitutes sexual harassment can lead to underreporting and a lack of understanding about the prevalence and seriousness of the issue in both workplace and educational settings. The authors argue that this misunderstanding contributes to environments where harassment is tolerated or minimised, further complicating effective responses to it.

Additionally, the survey by Adams et al. [1] reveals that over half of the respondents felt their workplace was tackling sexual harassment effectively, yet many had little awareness of existing training or policies. This indicates a broader issue within the school community regarding the understanding and communication of what constitutes sexual harassment and how it should be addressed. Similarly, Konlan and Dangah [28] identified a poor understanding of sexual harassment policies among students in Ghana, emphasising the need for educational institutions to take proactive measures to enhance awareness within the community. Therefore, it is crucial for school discipline committees, as implementers of sexual harassment policies, to have a thorough understanding of the issue and address it effectively.

4.3. Reporting barriers

Students feel ashamed or stigmatised when they experience sexual harassment, which discourages them from reporting these incidents. Participants indicated that this poses a significant challenge for SDCs in addressing harassment in public secondary schools. Data collected from interviews with assistant heads of schools and focus

group discussions with teachers and parents revealed two main barriers to reporting: fear and shame, particularly among female students. Instead of reporting, they often ignore the issue and accept such behaviour as normal. The interview with the Assistant Head of School Z showed that:

Female students can be touched in sensitive areas, such as the breasts, but because of their shyness, they cannot report it to the SDC or their class teachers. The committee fails to carry out its duties properly because it does not receive proper information on time, which affects students psychologically and leads to their failure in studies or sometimes dropping out. (Interview with Assistant Head of School Z in April 2024)

In a similar vein, the FGD with parents revealed that dealing with students' harassment cases is complicated even at the family level, as reported by one parent who stated:

These days, our society does not pay attention to issues related to sexual violence. For example, you can find that even at home, parents do not talk to their children about the effects of sexual violence. For this reason, a child can be subjected to sexual harassment at both home and school without being reported to any authority for actions. (FGD for parents at School X in April 2024)

Through FGD conducted with class teachers at School X, challenges in dealing with sexual abuse among female students were discussed, as emphasised by one teacher:

Girls rarely report to teachers or the school's discipline committee when they are sexually harassed. Sometimes, a girl can decide to absent herself from school due to shyness instead of reporting the abuse so that she can be helped. Ultimately, some girls may decide to drop out of school, hence failing to attain their life goals. (FGD for class teachers at School X in April 2024)

These findings were also complemented by the discipline teacher, who said:

The challenge that we have mostly in our school is reporting. Many students fear reporting immediately when harassment happens. We find it difficult to solve those challenges because of the lack of proper reporting of what happened in school. (Interview with Discipline Teacher at School Y in April 2024)

The findings reveal that many female students feel too ashamed to report sexual harassment incidents to teachers or School Discipline Committees (SDCs). This reluctance is compounded by societal and parental indifference, as cultural taboos often prevent open discussions about sexual violence. Addressing these systemic barriers is crucial, as they lead to truancy and psychological harm and hinder students from achieving their educational and personal goals. The study findings align with those of Adhia et al. [2], Aguilar and Baek [3], and Orchowski et al. [37], who pointed out that students often worry about social stigma and the repercussions on their peers, leading to silence in the face of harassment. In this context, individuals embodying the teamwork role characterised by cooperation and support can play a vital role in encouraging timely reporting. Therefore, strengthening reporting systems within SDCs is vital to facilitate open communication and effectively address SH incidents.

4.4. Insufficient training

Training for educators, administrators, and staff on addressing students' sexual harassment is essential for effective prevention, recognition, and response. Insufficient training can result in the mishandling of cases, as the researcher explored how this deficiency impacts School Discipline Committees in addressing sexual harassment. Participants indicated that teachers, including SDC members, lack the specialised training necessary to handle these incidents. Although harassment incidents are common, they are often overlooked in teacher preparation programs, which tend to focus more on professional development than on addressing sexual harassment. The Assistant Head of School Y held the following views:

The School Discipline Committee works by experience because it has never had training related to addressing students' sexual abuse. For this reason, SDCs fail to perform their roles well because they do not fully understand their responsibilities. (Interview with Assistant Head of School Y in April 2024)

The Head of School Z also provided views concerning insufficient training among the committee members:

We depend solely on people involved in social welfare issues to come to school and provide training on how to deal with sexual harassment, but we have never met them even once. The committee works based on their experience in dealing with violence, thereby creating difficulties in combating sexual harassment in our schools. (Interview with Head of School Z in April 2024)

Additionally, during the FGD with class teachers, one of them said:

Sometimes, teachers are motivated by being given seminars, workshops, or festivals. For me, I have never seen any training about sexual harassment conducted in our school. It is better for those who are supposed to ensure students are safe from sexual harassment cases to be given training. (FGD with class teachers at School X in April 2024)

These views were complemented by the discipline teacher at School Y, who added:

There should be training related to sexual violence, particularly on how to deal with sexual violence in schools. Everyone in schools, including newly employed teachers, should broadly understand how to handle sexual harassment incidents. (Interview with a Discipline Teacher at School Y in April 2024)

The findings highlight the pressing need for efficient training for SDCs regarding sexual harassment. In fact, training programs are vital and should provide practical guidelines on preventing harassment proactively, addressing complaints, and implementing appropriate actions against perpetrators. These findings align with those of Ige [22], Bondestam and Lundqvist [8], and de Lijster, Kok and Kocken [14], who found that inadequate experience among school discipline committee members is a factor affecting the effectiveness of the committee in implementing their roles. The need for committee members to work without interference, the cooperation of teachers with members, and the provision of in-service training for members are all recommended. This inadequacy puts schools at risk of mishandling sexual harassment incidents, as

members lack the specialised knowledge and trauma-informed practices necessary for effective intervention. The increasing rate of sexual harassment incidents can be partly attributed to new teachers' insufficient training in addressing these issues, making it essential to invest in comprehensive professional development for both SDCs and teaching staff in public secondary schools in Tanzania.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study explored the challenges that SDCs encounter in addressing student sexual harassment in Tanzania. The findings revealed that while SDCs employ various strategies to manage these issues, significant systemic barriers persist, operating at institutional, interpersonal, and societal levels.

A sequential implementation strategy is proposed to combat sexual harassment in Tanzanian schools. In the immediate term, policymakers should undertake a comprehensive reform of school policies to include detailed operational guidelines for SDCs, clearly specifying reporting procedures and accountability measures. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) must set standardised requirements for SDC composition, ensuring mandatory representation from counsellors, teachers, administrators, and students. In the medium term, it is crucial to implement comprehensive training programs for SDC members that focus on trauma-informed responses, effective investigation techniques, and legal compliance. Additionally, strengthening collaboration mechanisms between schools, community leaders, law enforcement, and child protection services is essential. In the long term, developing robust data collection and analysis systems is vital to monitor incidents and responses effectively, alongside implementing school-wide prevention programs that tackle the root causes of sexual harassment through evidence-based interventions.

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